Behavior/William Murray

A MINOR ISSUE OF MAJOR CONCERN

". . . Some people think that sex with children is natural, but the fact is that the children are hurt almost beyond hope of any recovery . . ."

"What's a California virgin?"
"An ugly six-year-old."

Pedophilia is not merely a dirty Hollywood joke these days; it's in danger of becoming a quite respectable recreation. It may have been big news to the outside world, for instance, that Roman Polanski had reportedly drugged and violated a thirteen-year-old girl, but it apparently wasn't an eye-opener to his circle. When the director was arrested on March 11 in the lobby of a hotel, while on his way to the theater with a group of friends, one female member of his party was heard to remark afterward to her date, "It must be little girls. Roman doesn't use drugs." And after Polanski was formally arraigned on several sex charges involving a minor, the wisecrack making the rounds in Hollywood was that the girl involved may indeed have been thirteen, "but she had the body of a ten-year-old."

Polanski has yet to be sentenced. He has pleaded guilty to having unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor, and the other more serious charges against him, such as furnishing drugs to a minor or rape by use of drugs, have been dropped. The plea bargain arrived at among the lawyers for the girl's family, the defense and the prosecution surprised almost nobody; it's the accepted practice in such cases. The ostensible reason always given is the desire to protect the victim, who, all the parties feel, should not be exposed to the possibly traumatic experience of a full-scale trial in a courtroom full of strangers. "Whatever harm has come to her as a victim would be exacerbated in the extreme if this case went to trial," Lawrence Silver, the attorney for the girl's family, said in court.

Judge Laurence Rittenband apparently agreed. He accepted the plea bargain and ordered Polanski to jail for 90 days to undergo psychiatric tests, after which the judge will formally sentence him. If found to be mentally disturbed, Polanski could be indefinitely committed to a hospital. Or he could be sentenced to up to 50 years in prison. Or, as an alien, he could simply be deported. At the moment he still has his freedom, having been granted a three-month delay in order to complete pre-production work on a movie. If he does eventually have to go to jail for more than 90 days or if the final sentence seems unduly harsh, his lawyers will undoubtedly appeal. After all, as defense attorney Douglas Dalton pointed out to the judge, of the 44 men arrested in Los Angeles County last year on similar charges, not one went to prison.

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Why is this man smiling? *Roman Polanski.*

Roman Polanski is a celebrity and so his case has received much more attention than most, which could ultimately, as his lawyer foresees, work to his disadvantage. When Henry Wynberg, described in a newspaper story as "a former boyfriend of actress Elizabeth Taylor," was sentenced to 90 days last July 25 in Beverly Hills for "contributing to the delinquency of a minor," nobody paid much attention. (Wynberg had originally been accused of providing drugs and alcohol to four high school girls, "participating in sexual acts" with them and "taking lewd photographs," but these charges and others were dropped when he pleaded nolo contendere to a single act of "fondling" a sixteen-year-old.) What the Polanski case has provided, apart from its qualities of gossip and scandal, is a startling glimpse into a newly fashionable kinky subculture, adult sex with children.

That Polanski himself has become something of a hero to a great many people is undeniable. No sooner had he been arrested than stories began appearing in various publications recalling his tragic early life in Poland under the Nazis and the murder in 1969 of his wife Sharon Tate by Charles Manson's weirdos. The feeling persists in Hollywood that in this case, too, the director has somehow been victimized.

The story most often heard is that he was set up. Since his arrest Polanski has made a public show of being seemingly unconcerned. He has been seen and photographed here and there with various beauties in their teens or early twenties, and he has been lionized at parties. After leaving one such gathering not long ago, at which people swarmed up to him to express their sympathy and solidarity, he reportedly remarked to his nineteen-year-old date, "You know, they must think I'm Jesus Christ."

It's doubtful whether anyone really thinks of Roman Polanski as Jesus Christ, but to some he may emerge as a martyr. What, these people ask, did the director actually do to this girl that deserves any sort of punishment? Besides, the reasoning goes, kids today are not what they were. There's been a sexual revolution and it's not at all unusual now for children of high-school age and under to indulge in sex; the era of repression and guilt is over. What difference does it make whether the girl was thirteen or sixteen or even ten? The only point worth considering is whether she knew what she was doing. If she did and was not coerced, then she had every moral right to do it, regardless of the law, which, as usual, is behind the times and represents only the lowest common denominator of accepted social behavior. Sex is as natural to children as to all healthy young animals.

There are now a number of increasingly vocal organizations here and abroad supporting this idea. The Childhood Sensuality Circle in San Diego publishes a newsletter promoting "childhood sensuality, youth lib and children's rights." Two London-based groups, PIE (Pedophile Information Exchange) and PAL (Pedophile Action for Liberation), provide information to their members, publish newsletters and promote so-called reform programs.

In Los Angeles, an organization called Better Life advocates what it calls

"boy-love" and puts out a monthly teeming with news and promotional chatter. In a recent editorial, Better Life plumped for the right of any child "to engage in, or refrain from, any sexual activity, whatever he chooses." Sex with an adult is seen as a right and the cause as a whole is propagated under the banner of "children's liberation." To that end another group, working out of a mail-forwarding address in Alhambra, California, and claiming the support of 2,000 parents and psychiatrists in 45 states, is sponsoring a revision of the penal code that would make what the law now defines as sexual abuse of a minor a felony only if it resulted in bodily injury to the child. "Let's face it," trumpets the *Better Life Monthly*. "Kids love sex. Laughing, naked, tumbling—upside-down—rightside-up—any way is fine with them, so long as it is fun."

The love of older men for young children is not a new historical phenomenon. We all know about the ancient Greeks and Romans, and in our own time a number of quite distinguished artists have romanticized the theme: One only has to mention Thomas Mann and Vladimir Nabokov. Further, such popular entertainments as *The Graduate* and *Candy* have also glorified the physical pursuit of youth. In most such works, especially those in which the love object is a young girl, the child no longer is portrayed as innocent, but as a tempter and sexually insatiable. A man who can make himself believe that can, of course, conveniently use it to justify whatever he may want to do.

"There's also a notion that contact, even just skin contact, with young children is rejuvenating," says one psychiatrist I talked to. "The notion of having sex with a child is a way of reliving youthful sex experiences."

Although statistics are difficult to come by, most police officers and some professional observers believe that child sex abuse is on the rise. They point to increased arrest figures and the recent proliferation of such magazines as *Nudist Moppets* and *Lollitots*, which display color photographs of children as young as three years old displaying their genitals. A number of men's magazines have also recently published heavy-breathing articles on the phenomenon, and a cartoon character named Chester the Molester has become a regular feature of *Hustler* magazine. According to a story in the *Los Angeles Times* last spring, investigator Lloyd Martin of the Los Angeles Police Department estimated that "30,000 boys and girls are sexually exploited by adults in the city of Los Angeles every year." Still, the only pertinent question to ask, if you were to accept the arguments that are now being

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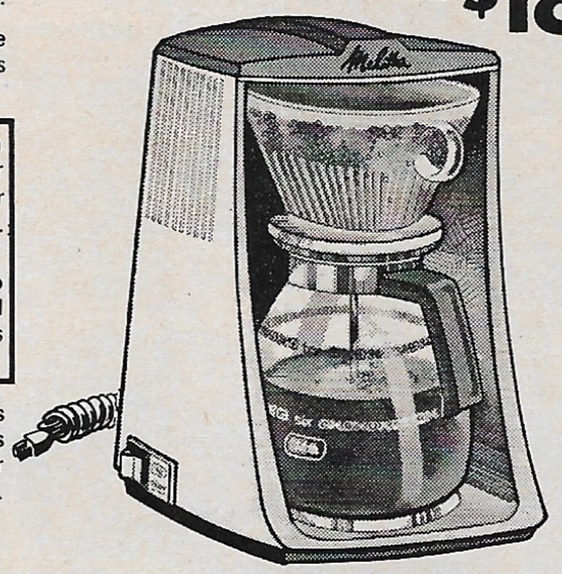

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made on behalf of child lib, would be whether the kids are having any fun.

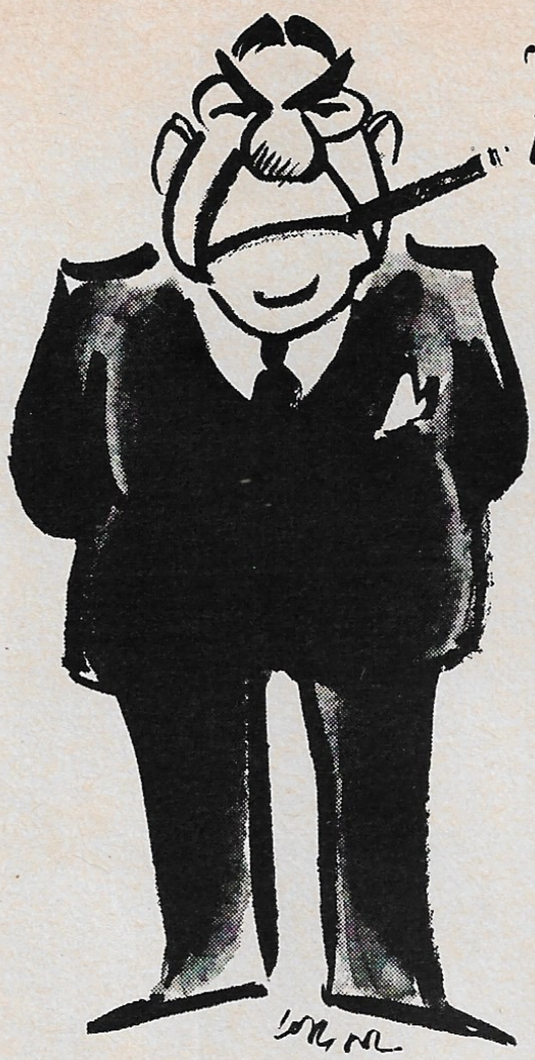
Not much, according to Dr. Roland Summit, head physician at Harbor General Hospital's Psychiatric Community Consultation Service. Summit, who probably knows more about the field than anyone else in the L.A. area, isn't certain whether child sex abuse is actually on the increase or not, but he does believe that society is only beginning to find out how widespread it is.

The first inkling came back in 1965, when a survey of 1,200 college-age women reported that 26 percent had had a sexual experience with an adult before the age of thirteen. "When you get into a conversation about this kind of thing," says Summit, "one out of four women can recall approaches at least, mostly by adults known to them—parents, friends, neighbors." In other words, the popular idea of the ominous stranger cruising the neighborhood with candy in his pockets is a false one.

Dr. Summit's best estimate is that "160 per million of population are immediately involved and request treatment," but the actual total, including both children and adults, is obviously much higher. Also, except for the facilities at Women's Hospital and UCLA, which concern themselves with all forms of crime against children, there are no real treatment centers for sexual abuse in the L.A. area. "We are only now becoming more aware of the problem," Summit observes. "Until recently our tendency was to shove it under the rug."

This attitude makes it very difficult either to treat victims or to prosecute offenders. The parents of the children are usually appalled and confused; they don't know how to deal with the problem and, in cases of incest, are involved themselves. Prosecutors feel they can't make a case and they dislike having to haul children into court. Very often the children themselves, perhaps originally seduced by favors, flattery and money, don't protest because they feel guilty and are terrified of the possible consequences. The result is that almost nobody is ever convicted on major counts, such as rape or incest, and few offenders ever are sent to prison. Even when the adult involved may want to admit his guilt and seek psychiatric therapy, his defense lawyer, knowing that he can get his client off and aware that consenting to treatment is in itself a tacit admission of guilt, will talk him out of it.

Most offenders, according to Summit, can be divided roughly into two main categories. The first consists mostly of repeat offenders who will not seek help and treatment and who can only be stopped by somehow removing them from society. The second category is



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made up of sexual adventurers, people who are focused on sex as a recreational style. They have tried practically everything, from group sex to sadomasochism, and are now into what they obviously consider the latest kick. They see themselves as liberated and progressive, certainly not as dangerous psychopaths or criminals, and have convinced themselves that whatever they do is fine, so long as no one is badly hurt by it.

The reality, however, is that the children are hurt almost beyond the hope of any recovery. "Sex abuse has a more profound effect on both pre-adolescents and adolescents than any other kind of abuse," Summit says. "It's commonly believed that by the age of six, human beings have developed powers of resistance, but sexual abuse throws them totally. Sexuality is so highly charged, so emotional. Children victimized in this way tend to develop a profound sense of loss of worth, a feeling that nobody cares about them, otherwise they wouldn't be put through such an experience."

They feel the whole thing must be their fault and indeed the first questions adults ask them, when they find out what has happened, are: "Why did you do it? What made you do it?" The children feel dirty and lose all sense of self-worth. And yet they learn that their only access to power, the only thing that makes a difference in their lives, is their sexuality. So, even as they despise it, they begin to overuse it.

"The bottom line here, especially with girls," Summit continues, "is that they tend to get into repetitive experiences with older men. As adults, they will seek out men who are strong and dominant. They will end by getting abused again and often beaten up. They feel they're only getting what they deserve. Many of them will have children who will in turn become victims of sexual abuse. The mothers will look the other way as their kids are being seduced and raped. They also use their kids as bait. It's a repetitive, cyclic pattern. We've found that 90 percent of the parents who can't exercise protection and can't resist taking advantage of their kids are mothers who as children suffered the same kinds of experiences."

The sexual abuse of children, Summit feels, is a far more harmful crime than even rape. An adult woman, after all, is at least in most cases a formed personality. A child, on the other hand, is led to sex with an adult knowing almost nothing. It would be a welcome change to hear someone express some sympathy today for the victims of such occurrences, instead of the usual spate of wisecracks and nasty jokes currently making the rounds and fouling the pages of too many magazines. ■

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